DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 448 474 CS 217 368

AUTHOR	Miller, Terri Lynn
TITLE	Creating a Sense of Community in the Classroom Using Children's Literature and Class Meetings.
PUB DATE	1999-05-00
NOTE	48p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Tests/Questionnaires (160)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Childrens Literature; Classroom Communication; *Classroom Environment; Discussion (Teaching Technique); Grade 4; Instructional Effectiveness; Intermediate Grades; *Picture Books; *Student Attitudes

ABSTRACT

Presentation and discussion of children's picture books as well as classroom meetings were implemented on a twice-weekly basis in a fourth grade classroom in an attempt to improve each student's sense of community within the classroom. A survey ("Measuring Classroom Community") which was administered to the teacher and to each student as well as interviews with the teacher and a group discussion/debriefing session with the students were used to determine the effectiveness of the six week series of interventions. Based on observations, student feedback, and teacher input, both of these interventions, used in conjunction with one another, seemed to be somewhat effective in helping to increase the overall sense of community within the classroom. (Contains 13 references. Appendixes contain teacher and student survey instruments; student debriefing questions; a description of book themes, discussions, and challenges; sample classroom meeting topics; and pre- and post-survey data on 5 questions.) (Author/RS)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 448 474

Running head: CREATING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN THE CLASSROOM

Creating a Sense of Community in the Classroom

Using Children's Literature and Class Meetings

Terri Lynn Miller

University of Virginia

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

T. L. Miller

CS 217 368

Abstract

Presentation and discussion of children's picture books as well as classroom meetings were implemented on a twice-weekly basis in a fourth grade classroom in an attempt to improve each student's sense of community within the classroom. A survey ("Measuring Classroom Community") which was administered to the teacher and to each student as well as interviews with the teacher and a group discussion/debriefing session with the students were used to determine the effectiveness of the six week series of interventions. Based on observations, student feedback, and teacher input, both of these interventions, used in conjunction with one another, seemed to be somewhat effective in helping to increase the overall sense of community within the classroom.

Creating a Sense of Community in the Classroom

Using Children's Literature and Class Meetings

Past research has spent a great deal of time examining the importance of having a sense of community amongst the teacher and the students in a classroom. Because teachers and students spend quite a bit of time together in rather close quarters it is very important that they are able to get along so that effective learning can take place without disruptions. There have been a number of studies suggesting different methods or techniques which teachers can use in their classroom in order to establish a sense of community and research has also indicated a wide range of reasons concerning exactly why a sense of community in the classroom is so very important.

In examining the importance of developing a sense of community in the classroom, it is important to first have a clear understanding of exactly what is meant by a sense of community. According to Schaps, Lewis, and Watson (1996), a sense of classroom community is when students have a:

> feeling of being connected to, valued by, and having influence with their classmates and teacher. . .[they] feel personally known and respected. They believe they have a significant say in class planning, decision making, and problem solving. And they believe that their fellow students care about them and care about learning. (p. 29)

Although each particular definition of one's sense of community varies a bit, this definition addresses most of the key points. Basically, students have a strong sense of community if they believe that their class works together as a team and cares for each other as a family would and, most importantly, if each student believes that he or she is an important and respected part of the community.

A strong sense of community within the classroom is important for a number of reasons. Johnson and Johnson (1990) suggest that a sense of community is essential if students are going to be able to work collaboratively with peers and, eventually, with co-workers in the adult world. In this context, a sense of community includes students being able to: "get to know and trust one another, communicate accurately and unambiguously, accept and support one another, and resolve conflicts" (p. 30). Without these skills, students simply cannot work together to achieve mutual goals. Furthermore, Johnson and Johnson (1990) suggest that teaching the social skills which result in a sense of classroom community results in "greater learning, retention, and critical thinking. . .greater employability and career success" (p. 32).

The research of Nicholes and Kubelick (1979) suggests yet another reason for the importance of developing a sense of community in the classroom. A classroom which operates as a community not only gives the students a chance to develop their social skills but it also contributes to their moral growth and development. Nicholes and Kubelick identify six conditions which are necessary for the development of a community within the classroom and, interestingly, these six conditions are the same as the conditions for moral development. Classrooms which operate as communities provide:

> role-taking opportunities where students have an opportunity to see things from other people's perspectives, conflict situations that stimulate moral discussions, problem solving opportunities, dialogue among peers in small groups, exposure to higher stage reasoning, and participation in a classroom structure perceived as just and fair by the student. (p. 33)

Thus, the moral and psychological development of students in a community-based classroom is enhanced as compared to that of students who do not have a sense of community within their classroom (Nicholes & Kubelick, 1979).

According to Meltzoff (1994), teachers are responsible for much more than simply passing on information to their students. While that is important, it is also very important that they build a community in their classroom and that they teach their students "to be both strong individuals and members of communities" (p. 13). That is, students must learn basic skills and knowledge but they also must learn how to get along with others so that they are prepared to become participating citizens within the greater community once they have completed school. Meltzoff uses the analogy of weaving in an attempt to describe exactly what she believes is necessary in order to build a community within the classroom. In this analogy, she suggests that a classroom is like weaving because "each individual strand interacts with others to form an integrated whole" (p. 15). Just as each strand of yarn in weaving goes together to collectively make a pattern, students in a classroom also work together to build the relationships which then define their classroom community. In particular, Meltzoff discusses ten strands which go into the weaving of a classroom community and suggests that the more strands which are present in any given classroom, the better the sense of community is in that classroom. The ten strands which blend together to create a classroom community are: "shared leadership, responsiveness, communication, moral unity, cooperation as a social process, shared history, shared environment, identification/involvement, wholeness, and interdependence" (p. 16). Essentially, this means that the teacher and students both contribute equally to what will go on in the classroom each day, students consider not only their own needs but also the needs of their classmates, everyone works towards common goals and for the good of the entire group, students each identify

themselves as important members of the group, and the teacher and students all have a sense of interdependence on one another. All of this is very important because "as children participate in communities in the context of schooling, they are given the opportunity to evolve as mature citizens, skilled in the intricacies of relational living" (Meltzoff, 1994, p. 25).

Research by Kim, Solomon, and Roberts (1995) found that teacher practices were, indeed, related to student behaviors which were, in turn, related to students' sense of community. In particular, teachers who emphasized prosocial values, encouraged students' thinking, sharing of ideas, and cooperation, showed warmth and supportiveness, and reduced their exercise of control positively influenced their students' sense of community in the classroom. Kim, Solomon, and Roberts (1995) especially found that activities which involved student interaction and participation as well as classroom discussions in which students' ideas were welcomed both contributed positively to a student's sense of community. Student behaviors which were determined to be related to a sense of community and which appeared to be positively related to teacher practices included student engagement, influence, and positive behavior. Thus, Kim, Solomon, and Roberts (1995) concluded that "students will experience a sense of community when their needs for belonging, autonomy and competence are satisfied within the group setting" (p. 14). A sense of community in the classroom is not just something that happens naturally--it must be carefully planned and provided for by the teacher.

Given all of the above-mentioned research, teachers are likely left wondering exactly what they should do to begin building a community atmosphere in their classroom. Because children come to school with varying degrees of self-esteem and because a student's self-esteem is related to his sense of community, it follows that some students who have less self-esteem will need more opportunities to really feel like they belong to the classroom community than other

students (Kosnik, 1993). For some students, an identification with the group will come quickly and easily while other students will need a great deal of time and much encouragement and reassurance before they identify themselves as a part of the classroom community. For the less secure students, Kosnik (1993) has several suggestions which will encourage and invite them in as full members of the class. She suggests that teachers could: highlight children's talents in frequent concerts or shows, have a weekly "class star and allow that student the opportunity to tell the class about him or herself, allow students to be "experts" and teach their classmates a skill they know, or allow strong readers a chance to read to those who are not as strong. Most importantly, Kosnik (1993) reminds teachers that "for children to believe that they are valuable members of the community, they must feel individually noticed and they must feel wanted. . students, like all of us, greatly benefit from others who see and communicate to them the positive traits and potentials that they may not see in themselves" (p. 36).

Through an interview with Mike Perry, a fifth grade teacher in Michigan, Graves (1990) saw some other techniques which were useful for creating a classroom community. Mike Perry truly realized the importance of group work and cooperative learning in helping to create a classroom community when he was placed in a combination first-second-third grade classroom setting. Because he was dealing with such a wide range of ages, it was very important for him to spend some time helping his students to relate to one another and accept each other for who they really were. He believes in making his students realize that they absolutely must learn to cooperate and work as a unified team which operates on the basis of mutual concern for each other if they are going to get along in his classroom. He displays personal interest in the lives of his students by attending their outside activities and performances and, inside the classroom, he provides time for daily class meetings just to talk and he centers essentially all of the activities in

his classroom around working in teams, groups, or committees in which the students must unify and learn to cooperate in order to succeed. Additionally, he randomly changes the classroom seating arrangement every month which positively affects the quality and quantity of interaction amongst all of the students. Mike Perry expresses it most clearly when he says "If I can help everybody feel this is *our* classroom, *our* little family, that's like a catalyst for cooperative learning--a little grease on the axle and then they can collaborate" (Graves, 1990, p. 12).

The research of Schaps, Lewis, and Watson (1996) further supports Mike Perry's emphasis on cooperative learning. They suggest that "high quality cooperative learning, in which students are friendly, helpful, show concern, and work collaboratively enhances a sense of community" (p. 30). In particular, Schaps, Lewis, and Watson (1996) suggest five directed guidelines for strengthening the sense of community in a classroom. First, it is important that teachers build relationships with their students and recognize them as real human beings. Building a relationship can be done with things as simple as eating lunch with the students and talking to them. Second, teachers need to involve their students in planning and problem solving by providing time for class meetings and independent, student-chosen projects. Third, teachers can help their students get to know each other's strengths and interests by implementing a "Special Person of the Week" program, or another similar program. Fourth, teachers must reduce the amount of competition between students in their classroom, thereby increasing the sense of mutual supportiveness and cooperation. Finally teachers should involve the students in taking care of the classroom responsibilities, thereby sending the message that the classroom belongs to them just as much as it belongs to the teacher. By following these guidelines, Schaps, Lewis, and Watson (1996) suggest that students will develop a high sense of community which has been shown to be linked to "greater liking for school, greater enjoyment of class, stronger

motivation to learn, greater concern for others, better conflict-resolution skills, stronger commitment to democratic values, higher sense of efficacy, and more frequent altruistic behavior" (p. 30).

It has been suggested that the use of children's literature in the classroom is also very useful for getting students to open up and talk, thus building a sense of community in the classroom. Dickinson and Allison (1995) suggest that talk is the foundation upon which a classroom community must be based and, thus, they take the time on a regular basis for their fifth and sixth grade students to sit close together on the floor while they read aloud various picture books. At each gathering, they read a picture book and then simply ask the students to share their thoughts and feelings about the story they just heard and the students usually respond very willingly by sharing their own personal stories. Likewise, the Zellerbach Family Fund (1990) has developed a literature-based language arts program based on the belief that talk amongst students helps to develop a sense of community. In this program, the creators found that:

> students develop a sense of community with their peers as they talk together. . .and read and enjoy works of literature. They become aware of their classmates' lives. . .thus expanding their appreciation of people with backgrounds and points of view that may differ from their own. Students come to feel that they are part of a larger community. (p. 2-3)

Thus, through this literature-based language arts program, students improve their fluency and ability to express themselves and, at the same time, develop an appreciation of their classmates' diversity (Dickinson & Allison, 1990).

Von Dras (1995) also believes that the use of children's literature and talk are probably the most powerful forces she has available to use in her fourth/fifth grade classroom. She asserts that "literature encourages multiple perspectives: many voices are heard and many experiences are shared" (p. 31). In particular, Von Dras recalls a time when she was having difficulty with her students making fun of one of their peers and she used a connection to children's literature to help resolve the conflict. She reminded the students about a book they had read and they talked about the lesson they learned from the book and how they could apply that lesson to their own behavior in the classroom. By making a literature connection, the students were able to put their behavior into perspective and Von Dras found that the students' attitudes permanently improved. "Devin who had had a hard time 'fitting in' over the past two years, was now being accepted for himself. . .the forum for talk allowed us to examine our beliefs relative to our actions" (p. 36). By using children's literature and allowing for talk amongst the students in the classroom, these students were able to gain a better sense of themselves and a greater understanding of the diversity amongst their peers (Von Dras, 1995).

A great deal of research has been done concerning the importance of building a sense of community in the classroom and the central importance and impact of the teacher's actions in the process of building the classroom community. Research has also suggested that class meetings and the use of children's literature create an environment which encourages talk amongst students. The purpose of this research was to explore that connection further. The researcher was interested in finding out whether class meetings and the use of children's literature did, in fact, create a forum for open talk and sharing in a fourth grade classroom and whether that, in turn, helped to improve the sense of community in the classroom, as measured by a published classroom community survey.

Method

Design and Participants

In this study, data were collected and interventions were implemented in a fourth grade classroom at an elementary school in a small rural county in Virginia. Initial surveys were completed by the classroom teacher as well as twenty-four students and, following six weeks of interventions, the survey was completed again by the teacher and the same twenty-four students. On the day in which the initial survey was administered, one student was absent and, during the course of the interventions, one new student entered the classroom. Because neither of these students participated in the initial survey and the new student, in particular, did not already have a feel for the initial sense of community within the classroom, it was decided that neither of them would participate in the final survey. In addition to the initial and final surveys, which were identical, the teacher responded to a general question at the beginning of the study and a series of eleven questions at the conclusion of the study. The students also participated in a group discussion/debriefing session in order to obtain more detailed information concerning the effectiveness of the interventions. Of the twenty-four students, twelve were female and twelve were male, although this information was not specified on each participant's survey and, thus, this information was not taken into consideration in analysis of the data. The students came from a relatively rural environment and many were from a lower socio-economic background, as well. The teacher was a Caucasian female from rural Virginia and the students in the class were predominantly Caucasian, as well, with the exception of one Filipino boy and one African-American girl.

Measures

"Measuring Classroom Community" survey and classroom teacher attachment. The survey which was used as a basis for measuring the sense of community within the classroom was taken from Schaps, Lewis, and Watson (1996) but was actually established at the Developmental Studies Center (1990). The survey distinguishes between two categories which, together, measure the sense of community in the classroom: "the feeling that one's class members are supportive, helpful, and mutually concerned; and the feeling that students have influence on classroom plans, activities, and decisions." Because of the two distinct parts of a sense of community, the survey was divided into two parts: "Classroom Supportiveness" and "Classroom Autonomy and Influence" (see Appendix A for complete survey). The survey consisted of twenty-four statements, fourteen of which were categorized under "Classroom Supportiveness" and ten of which were categorized under "Classroom Autonomy and Influence." In the first section, participants were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 to 5 whether they 'disagree a lot', 'disagree a little', 'don't agree or disagree', 'agree a little', or 'agree a lot' with each of the statements. Then, in the second section, participants were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 to 5 whether each statement was 'never true', 'hardly ever true', 'sometimes true', 'often true', or 'always true' for their classroom. Six questions were phrased in such a way that they needed to be reverse-scored, that is the statements were negatively phrased and the scale was reversed (see survey statements 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, and 17). In analysis of the data, overall scores were considered as well as individual scores for particular questions. Because each statement could be given a score between 1 and 5 and because there were 24 statements on the entire survey, scores could range anywhere from 24 to 120, with a score range of 14 to 70 on the first section and 10 to 50 on the second section. Participants were assured that their surveys were completely anonymous

and that nobody would ever know how they answered and, thus, they were encouraged to answer as openly and honestly as possible. The teacher was asked to complete the same survey as the students completed but, in addition to the survey, she was also asked to complete an additional, open-ended question concerning her initial sense of community within the classroom (see Appendix B).

Final teacher evaluation of real aloud discussions and classroom meeting interventions. As with the initial open-ended question, the final teacher evaluation was completed by the teacher as an addition to the final survey. The final teacher evaluation consisted of eleven questions regarding the teacher's observations during the interventions as well as her thoughts concerning the effectiveness of the read aloud discussions and classroom meetings in developing a sense of community within the classroom (see Appendix C for final teacher evaluation). Questions addressed her opinions concerning the usefulness of the read aloud discussions, the usefulness of the classroom meetings, her thoughts on whether or not she will continue to use the interventions with her students, and her overall impression concerning any changes in the sense of community within the classroom, either for her or for any of the student participants. This final evaluation was given to the teacher two days before the final survey was administered in order to allow her plenty of time to carefully consider and respond to the questions.

Group discussion/debriefing session. After completion of the six week series of interventions and after administration of the final "Measuring Classroom Community" survey, a group discussion/debriefing session was conducted with the student participants (see Appendix D for debriefing questions). The debriefing session was conducted for much the same reason as the final evaluation which the teacher completed--in an attempt to get more specific feedback concerning the effectiveness of the read aloud discussions and the classroom meetings in

increasing the sense of community in the classroom. The researcher led the discussion and called only on those students who raised their hands and indicated a desire to give their input and feedback concerning the interventions. Thus, every student was not required to contribute to the information collected at the debriefing session, although most did choose to voice their opinions.

Procedures

All surveys, discussions, and interventions took place in the fourth grade classroom in an attempt to measure and then improve the sense of community within that classroom. Before the administration of the initial "Measuring Classroom Community" survey, it was briefly explained to the student participants that their sense of community and belonging in their classroom was going to be examined and they were asked to respond to the statements as honestly as possible. The teacher, on the other hand, had been made aware of the intention and the goals of the upcoming interventions. Initial surveys were administered to the students and the teacher and were scored according to the established scale.

After administration of the initial survey, a schedule was set up and it was determined that two types of interventions would be used in the classroom and that each intervention would take place once a week for forty minutes for a period of approximately six weeks. The first intervention involved using children's literature within the classroom. Each week the students, the teacher, and the researcher gathered in a circle on the floor and the researcher read aloud a picture book which was then followed up with an open-ended discussion as well as a specific challenge for each student to personally apply the principles addressed in the books to their interactions with their peers in the classroom. For each book, a list of questions was prepared ahead of time and was used to guide the discussion and as a way of making sure that all pertinent issues were discussed.

Each book was selected because it addressed issues or skills which were important for the students in the classroom to master. The books were also selected because they contained thought-provoking stories which could be easily extended and applied to life in the classroom. The primary goal in reading and discussing the books was for the students to recognize and accept their differences and to develop a community relationship in which everyone's thoughts and experiences were not only accepted but celebrated. By providing the students with an opportunity to share their experiences, the expectation was that they would begin to feel accepted for who they really were and also that they would begin to view themselves as belonging to a supportive and mutually concerned community. By the end of the six weeks series of interventions, the following picture books had been used for the read aloud sessions: *Magical Hands* by Marjorie Barker Yoshi, *Why Frog and Snake Never Play Together* retold by Ashley Bryan, *A Piece of Home* by Sonia Levitin, and *Louise's Gift* by Irene Smalls (see Appendix E for description of the books' themes and the resulting challenges). Because of snow days and changes in the school's schedule, the children's literature sessions only took place four times.

The second intervention involved establishing a regularly scheduled classroom meeting once a week for the duration of the six weeks. These class meetings were presented to the students as an opportunity for them to express any concerns, requests, or problems they had with particular classroom routines or procedures or with other students in the classroom. The class meetings were intended to be a place where the students could openly and honestly express their feelings and concerns and, with the help of their teacher and peers, they were also a place where they could come up with solutions to their problems. A mailbox was set up in the back storage room in the classroom and index cards were made available so that the students could place their requests for agenda items in the mailbox easily and discretely. Whenever a student had an

agenda item request, he or she simply filled out an index card describing the problem or issue in enough detail that it could be understood and discussed at one of the meetings and submitted it. In order to encourage open discussion of problems and issues, the students were given the option of submitting their agenda items anonymously and, in fact, several students actually took advantage of this option (see Appendix F for class meeting topics).

Initially, some time was spent going over expectations and rules for the class meetings so that everyone understood how things were going to work however a great deal of time doing this was not necessary because several of the students were already familiar with class meetings from the previous year in their third grade classroom. The discussion of rules and expectations resulted in the following general guidelines: participation was not required but respectful listening was, raising hands to speak was not required but that meant that everyone had to be respectful of other students' contributions to the discussions (negative comments and interruptions were unacceptable), and seating would be on the floor in a circle and a specific seating arrangement would not be specified unless disrespectful behavior required such assignments to be made. The general format for each class meeting consisted of a review of the problem and solution from the previous class meeting(s), a general discussion of how things were going in the classroom, a few minutes to hear the requested agenda items and vote on the one to be addressed in that meeting, a brainstorming and problem-solving session, and a brief preview of the upcoming interventions for the following week. Throughout the course of the six weeks of interventions, a total of five class meetings were conducted.

After the six week series of interventions, the teacher and the students were asked to complete the final "Measuring Classroom Community" survey which was identical to the initial survey. In completing the survey, the students were asked to respond according to the classroom

environment only in the previous six weeks. That is, their responses were to reflect their feelings about the class and their sense of community within the classroom since the read alouds, discussions, and class meetings had been implemented. In addition, the teacher completed eleven short answer questions pertaining to her sense of community in the classroom and the effectiveness of the interventions and the students participated in a discussion/ debriefing session in which they were given the opportunity to express their feelings about the read alouds, the class meetings, and their overall sense of community in the classroom.

Data Analysis

Following the series of interventions and administration of the initial and final surveys, descriptive analysis was performed using a statistical analysis program called SPSS. Statistics which were examined included means, minimums, maximums, frequencies, and correlations. All correlations were calculated using Pearson-product moment correlations.

Results

After completion of the six week series of interventions, the final "Measuring Classroom Community" survey was administered to the teacher and the students and the data were compared to the data from the initial survey in order to determine the effectiveness of the interventions. Each survey consisted of 24 statements and each statement was rated on a scale from one to five, depending on the participant's degree of agreement with the statement. Thus, overall scores could range anywhere from a low of 24 to a high of 120. On the initial survey, the mean overall score for the student participants was 73.6 including scores which ranged from 36 to 93 while the teacher scored a 95. On the final survey, the mean overall score for the student participants was 78.5, with scores ranging from 61 to 96 and the teacher scored a 99. It is also valuable, however, to examine the mean scores for the two sections of the survey separately. For

the first part of the survey which measured classroom supportiveness, scores could range from 14 to 70. On the initial survey, the mean student score was 49.5 with scores ranging from 23 to 66 and the teacher's score was 65 and, on the final survey, the mean score was 53.7 with scores ranging from 34 to 70 and the teacher scored a 69. For the second part of the survey which measured classroom autonomy and influence, scores could range from 10 to 50. On the initial survey, the mean score for this section was 24.5 with scores ranging from 13 to 39 and a teacher score of 35 and, on the final survey, the mean score for this section was 24.8 with scores ranging from 12 to 42 and a teacher score of 30.

Statistical analysis of the data which were collected from the surveys indicated a number of significant correlations between various statements on the survey. Concerning classroom autonomy and influence, significant correlations existed between the following sets of questions: fifteen and sixteen with r=.703 (p=.01), fifteen and twenty-two with r=.650 (p=.01), fifteen and twenty-four with r=.636 (p=.01), sixteen and twenty-four with r=.523 (p=.01), and twenty-two and twenty-four with r=.719 (p=.01). Concerning classroom supportiveness, statistically significant correlations were found between the following questions: one and twelve with r=.598 (p=.01), four and ten with r=.627 (p=.01), seven and twelve with r=.544 (p=.01), ten and twelve with r=.621 (p=.01), and twelve and thirteen with r=.589 (p=.01). Question thirteen was also found to be correlated with question four with r=.422 (p=.05), question six with r=.460 (p=.05), and question ten with r=.428 (p=.05). Numerous other significant correlations were found between various survey questions at the p=.05 level.

Discussion

In determining the effectiveness of the read alouds, discussions, and class meeting interventions in increasing the sense of community in the classroom, it is important to not only

consider the quantitative data collected from the initial and final surveys but it is also important to consider the comments and feedback which the teacher gave in the form of written responses to questions and which the students gave verbally during the debriefing session. The slight increase in the overall mean scores from the initial to the final surveys seems to suggest that the interventions may have been successful in helping to increase the sense of community in the classroom. Because this increase in the mean was relatively small, however, it is more useful to look at the ranges of the scores. It is interesting to note that, on the initial survey, one fourth of the students had scores which were a great deal lower than even the lowest score on the final survey. Thus, according to the survey results, at least one fourth of the students experienced an increased sense of community in the classroom following the series of interventions. It is also interesting to note that, in both the initial and the final surveys, the teacher had an overall score which was higher than that of any of her students. This should be a warning to teachers about the importance of maintaining open and honest communication with their students and taking the time to consider their students' perspectives (Nicholes & Kubelick, 1979) because they often have a very different perspective on how things are generally going in the classroom than the students do. Thus, just because a teacher feels that her class is running smoothly does not necessarily mean that the students feel the same way and class meetings seem to be an excellent way for students to express their frustrations with the class and with how they generally feel things are going.

Consideration of the two separate sections of the survey also reveals some interesting observations. In the first section which measured classroom supportiveness, the average score for students increased a fair amount whereas the average student score for classroom autonomy and influence increased only very slightly. Thus, it seems clear that most of the increases in the

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

students' sense of community could be attributed to their improved sense of belonging in the classroom rather than an increase in their sense of classroom autonomy and influence. This data suggests that, after the interventions, the students felt more like full members of their class and had greater confidence that their classmates respected them as individuals. They viewed their classmates as more helpful and generally supportive. On the other hand, the low scores as well as the very small increase in scores in the section which measured classroom autonomy and influence seems to indicate that the read alouds, discussions, and class meetings had little, if any, impact on the students' sense of control within their classroom. According to the data, the students did not feel that they had very much influence on the plans, activities, and decisions which took place in the classroom. Even after the interventions, they still did not feel as though the teacher was willing to consider their input concerning how the classroom was set up or how the day-to-day activities in the classroom were run. In each of the class meetings, issues which were brought up were always issues of concern either for one student or for small groups of students. Although student scores on the surveys suggested that the students were dissatisfied with their influence in the classroom, specific issues concerning the teacher and how she runs the classroom were never actually brought up. Perhaps this was because they felt that it would be of no use to even try to change things within the classroom or perhaps it was because they were so accustomed to having no influence that they did not even know where to begin making suggestions--it is impossible to determine but the fact remains that classroom autonomy and influence issues were not brought up. It is possible that, as Kim, Solomon, and Roberts (1995) and Kosnik (1993) suggested, in order to increase the students' sense of classroom autonomy and influence, the teacher would need to be the one to initiate issues and give the students personal invitations to make suggestions and share their ideas. The teacher's score for classroom

autonomy and influence was interesting because it actually decreased from the initial to the final survey. This could mean that, through the interventions, she became more reflective and more aware that she controls most of what goes on in the classroom and, thus, responded to the statements on the final survey more honestly or it could mean that she felt as though she had given up some of her control upon implementation of the interventions but, again, it is impossible to know which of these, if either, is the case.

Upon analyzing the responses to individual statements on the survey, it was found that the largest improvements in average scores were reflected in questions one ("Students in my class are willing to go out of their way to help someone"), three ("My class is like a family"), eight ("Students in my class don't get along very well"), thirteen ("Students in my class work together to solve problems"), and fourteen ("When someone in my class does well, everyone in the class feels good"). Upon administration of the final survey, it was evident that there was an increase in the number of students giving these questions high scores compared to the corresponding scores on the initial survey (see Appendix G for graphs). Thus, after the read alouds and class meetings, the students generally felt more like their class was a family and that all of the members were willing to help one another to solve problems and succeed, just as was suggested by Schaps, Lewis, and Watson (1996) and Von Dras (1995). It was rather unexpected that the scores on some of the questions actually decreased between the initial and the final surveys. In particular, the data suggested that questions four ("The students in my class don't really care about each other"), five ("A lot of students in my class like to put others down"), and six ("Students in my class help each other learn") worsened over the course of the six weeks. Questions four and five were both worded negatively and perhaps the students misunderstood or had difficulty understanding what exactly the statements were saying. If this was not the case,

however, it is also possible that the scores reflect the fact that, although the general atmosphere in the classroom has improved, there are still certain people who tend to be somewhat selfishly motivated and, in that respect, damage the sense of classroom community for the others.

The statistically significant correlations in the classroom autonomy and influence portion of the survey all involved questions which had to do with whether the teacher allows the students to have a say in planning and in deciding what goes on in the classroom. The significant correlations between several combinations of these questions (fifteen, sixteen, twenty-two, and twenty-four) suggest that the students felt strongly that they did not have a say in what went on in the classroom, even after implementation of the classroom meetings. While the students seemed to appreciate the class meetings, the data suggest that perhaps they viewed the class meetings as a useful place to address their personal concerns but not as a forum in which they were able to gain autonomy and influence in the operations of their classroom. When asked the same basic question in four different ways in these questions, the students consistently responded negatively concerning their degree of influence in the classroom.

Several of the significant correlations in the classroom supportiveness portion of the survey included statement twelve: "Students in my class treat each other with respect" and, thus, those statements with which it was significantly correlated suggest those conditions which this particular group of students felt were necessary in order to feel a sense of respect in the classroom. For instance, the correlations suggest that those students who believe that their peers treat each other with a great deal of respect also believe that their peers are willing to go out of their way to help someone (question one), are willing to help everyone whether or not they are friends (question seven), and are not mean to each other (question ten). Thus, to create an environment of respect, the students expect each other to be helpful and friendly towards

everyone (Meltzoff, 1994). The significant correlation between question twelve ("Students in my class treat each other with respect") and question thirteen ("Students in my class work together to solve problems") is especially interesting because it suggests that the class meetings may have been effective at helping to build a sense of respect and, therefore, community in the classroom. The correlations between question thirteen and questions four ("The students in my class don't really care about each other"), six ("Students in my class help each other learn"), and ten ("Students in my class are mean to each other") suggest that the students who felt that the class meetings gave them an opportunity to work together with their classmates to solve problems also felt that their peers really cared about each other and were mutually concerned about helping each other learn. It was unexpected that there was no significant correlation between questions thirteen and three ("My class is like a family") because, based on past research, it would have been expected that students who felt their class worked together to solve problems would also feel that their class was like a family. It is possible that this lack of significant correlation is due to the very literal nature of fourth graders. That is, fourth graders tend to think about "family" in a very literal sense (mother, father, and siblings) and, thus, to apply the concept of a family to their classmates is not something they are able to conceptualize. It is possible that, had the interventions been implemented in an older classroom, a significant correlation would have existed between these statements.

Although the data from this survey revealed some interesting observations concerning the sense of community in the classroom, it did not reveal as much about the effectiveness of the interventions as simply talking to the teacher and students and getting their feedback could do. When the teacher completed the attachment to the initial survey she felt that the students were generally kind and considerate to each other. She suggested, however, that much of their

kindness towards each other was merely to please the teacher and not because they were truly self-motivated to do so. She felt that they "lack a bond which makes them a unit" and that they could benefit from any interventions which would help to improve their sense of community in the classroom. In the "final teacher evaluation" of the interventions which were implemented in her classroom, the teacher responded positively to the results as she observed them. From her perspective and based on her observations, the read alouds and the class meetings were both useful in enhancing the sense of community. Concerning the read alouds and the resulting discussions, the teacher believed, as was suggested by Dickinson and Allison (1995) and Von Dras (1995), that the books made the students more aware of themselves and also helped them to think more about others than about themselves. *Louise's Gift*, in particular, made the students more aware of their own strengths and more appreciative of the strengths of their classmates. Concerning the class meetings, the teacher reported that they encouraged "active discussions with helpful suggestions and productive results." Although no agenda items were suggested for the first meeting, the suggestions quickly picked up and, once the students were comfortable, the meetings definitely produced beneficial results. In fact, the teacher even commented that she saw the observable negative behaviors of two of her students decrease after the class meetings were implemented. These two students were described as having poor social skills but, after the class meetings began, the teacher observed that they were both able to openly discuss their problems and readily listen to and accept peer suggestions. "They liked being the center of attention but secretly appreciated the care and thought that went into the discussions." In fact, the teacher found the meetings to be so helpful in making individual students feel better about themselves and allowing students to civilly and productively resolve conflicts that she plans to continue using them on a weekly basis. She believes that the class meetings and, to a certain

extent the read alouds and discussions, gave everyone an outlet in which to offer support and encouragement to their classmates and they softened the hearts of some slightly antagonistic students by implanting in them the desire to "get along and be a positive part of the group."

By allowing the students an opportunity to offer their feedback and thoughts on the read alouds, discussions, and class meetings, it was found that the students generally appreciated the class meetings and found them useful in enhancing their sense of community in the classroom. The read alouds and discussions, on the other hand, were useful in that they addressed significant issues but they did not appear to really improve the students' sense of belonging in the same way that the class meetings did. From the read alouds and the resulting discussions, the students learned some interesting things about their classmates which they did not already know but there were not enough read alouds to really begin to impact their sense of belonging in the community. Each book did send a message to the students: *Magical Hands* taught the students that good friends go out of their way to help each other and that good friends are caring; *Why Frog and Snake Never Play Together* showed the students that people can be friends even if they are very different and that the classroom would be very boring if everyone were exactly the same; *A Piece of Home* encouraged the students to look for similarities between themselves and their peers because people often have more similarities than they initially realize; and *Louise's Gift* helped the students to recognize that everyone is good at something and that everyone is special in their own unique way. Although the students appreciated the messages in each of the picture books, they did not appear to generalize the messages to their lives and interactions in the classroom. Given more time, the read alouds would likely be an effective way to get the students to become more accepting of others, despite their differences but, given the brief duration of the interventions, the read alouds were not very effective. The only real complaint about the read

alouds and discussions was that the students often felt as though their classmates were not listening as they share things because they were fidgeting around. Thus, for the read alouds to be more effective, appropriate listening skills and strategies would also have to be addressed and established in the classroom.

The students were much more positive about the class meetings and their impact on the sense of community than they were about the read alouds and discussions. They felt that the class meetings were useful because they offered an outlet through which the students could work together to solve each other's problems (Johnson & Johnson, 1990; Nicholes & Kubelick, 1979). They appreciated the opportunity to get other people's opinions and input concerning their own issues and problems and they also appreciated the challenge of coming up with useful solutions for their classmates' problems. Many of the students expressed their appreciation that the class meetings made them feel like they could ask others for help and that they gave everyone a chance to collaborate to solve problems which were too big for one person to deal with on his or her own. Although all of the problems addressed in the class meetings resulted in successful solutions, several students suggested that, even if successful solutions were not found, the class meetings would still be helpful because they would still be an outlet for the students to at least express their frustrations. As a result of the feedback from the students, it was much easier to speculate on the reasons for the increased sense of community in the classroom. Given more time, the read alouds and discussions would have been more effective but the class meetings were undoubtedly the most helpful intervention in enhancing the sense of community in the classroom. They made the students feel like important, valued members of a community and, given more time and proper guidance from the teacher, they would probably also allow for an

increased sense of autonomy and influence within the classroom, thereby even further increasing the students' sense of classroom community.

Although this research seemed to indicate that implementation of class meetings combined with the use of children's literature contributed to an increased sense of community in the classroom, the research could most certainly be improved upon. Because of time constraints which were out of the researcher's hands, the implementations were only in place in the classroom for approximately six weeks. Past research has shown that increasing the sense of community in a classroom is a task which must be done gradually and over a long period of time and, thus, it would be beneficial to implement the class meetings and children's literature interventions in a classroom for longer than six weeks in order to see if the sense of community continues to improve. It would also be useful to implement the class meetings and the children's literature sessions separately in order to determine if either intervention is effective when used independently or if the interventions are most effective when used in conjunction with one another. The interventions could also be implemented with children in different grades in order to determine whether they appear to be more or less effective with much older or much younger students. Any of these suggestions for future research would certainly produce further insight which would be useful for teachers who are interested in increasing the sense of community in their classroom.

References

Bryan, A. (1980). Why frog and snake never play together. From Beat the Story-Drum, Pum-Pum. Hartford, CT: The Connecticut Printers, Inc.

Dickinson, J., & Allison, R. (1995). Talk and picture books in intermediate classrooms. Primary Voices K-6, 3 (1), 8-15.

Graves, N. (1990). Creating a caring classroom community. Cooperative Learning, 11 (2), 9-12.

Johnson, D.W., & Johnson, R.T. (1990). Social skills for successful group work. Educational Leadership, 47 (4), 29-33.

Kim, D., Solomon, D., & Roberts, W. (1995). Classroom practices that enhance students' sense of community. Oakland, CA: Developmental Studies Center. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 385 514)

Kosnik, C. (1993). Everyone is a V.I.P. in this class. Young Children, 49 (1), 32-34.

Levitin, S. (1996). A Piece of Home. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.

Meltzoff, N. (1994). Relationship, the fourth 'R': The development of a classroom community. The School Community Journal, 4 (2), 13-26.

Nicholes, D.R., & Kubelick, C.L. (1979). Creating a classroom community. Pittsburgh, PA: Allegheny Intermediate Unit. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 198 029)

Schaps, E., Lewis, C., & Watson, M. (1996). Building community in school. Principal, 76 (2), 29-31.

Smalls, I. (1996). Louise's Gift. New York: Little, Brown and Company.

Von Dras, J.C. (1995). Will the real teacher please stand up? Primary Voices K-6, 3 (1), 30-37.

Yoshi, M.B. (1989). Magical Hands. Saxonville, MA: Picture Book Studio.

Appendix A

"Measuring Classroom Community" Survey

(Adapted from original survey in: Schaps, Lewis, & Watson, 1996)

Directions: Please answer the following questions as honestly as possible. Your name will not be on your survey so nobody else will ever know how you answered each of the questions. Simply circle the answer which you think is most true.

1) Students in my class are willing to go out of their way to help someone.

disagree a lot disagree a little don't know agree a little agree a lot

2) My classmates care about my work just as much as their own.

disagree a lot disagree a little don't know agree a little agree a lot

3) My class is like a family.

disagree a lot disagree a little don't know agree a little agree a lot

4) The students in my class don't really care about each other.

disagree a lot disagree a little don't know agree a little agree a lot

5) A lot of students in my class like to put others down.

disagree a lot disagree a little don't know agree a little agree a lot

6) Students in my class help each other learn.

disagree a lot disagree a little don't know agree a little agree a lot

7) Students in my class help each other, even if they are not friends.

disagree a lot disagree a little don't know agree a little agree a lot

8) Students in my class don't really get along together very well.

disagree a lot disagree a little don't know agree a little agree a lot

9) Students in my class just look out for themselves.

disagree a lot disagree a little don't know agree a little agree a lot

10) Students in my class are mean to each other.

disagree a lot disagree a little don't know agree a little agree a lot

11) When I'm having trouble with my work, at least one classmate will try to help.

disagree a lot disagree a little don't know agree a little agree a lot

12) Students in my class treat each other with respect.

disagree a lot disagree a little don't know agree a little agree a lot

13) Students in my class work together to solve problems.

disagree a lot disagree a little don't know agree a little agree a lot

14) When someone in my class does well, everyone in the class feels good.

disagree a lot disagree a little don't know agree a little agree a lot

15) Students have a say in deciding what goes on.

never hardly ever sometimes often always

16) The teacher lets us do things our own way.

never hardly ever sometimes often always

17) The teacher is the only one who decides on the rules.

never hardly ever sometimes often always

18) The teacher lets me choose what I will work on.

never hardly ever sometimes often always

19) The teacher and students together plan what we will do.

never hardly ever sometimes often always

20) I get to do things that I want to do.

never hardly ever sometimes often always

21) The teacher and students decide together what the rules will be.

never hardly ever sometimes often always

22) The teacher asks the students to help decide what the class should do

never hardly ever sometimes often always

23) Students in my class can get a rule changed if they think it is unfair.

never hardly ever sometimes often always

24) Students in my class get to help plan what they will do.

never hardly ever sometimes often always

Appendix B

Classroom Teacher Attachment to Initial "Measuring Classroom Community" Survey

Background:

According to some of the past research, classroom community includes two major elements: the feeling that one's class members are supportive, helpful, and mutually concerned; and the feeling that students have influence on classroom plans, activities, and decisions (Developmental Studies Center, 1990).

Directions:

According to the above definition, where do you feel your class stands as far as their sense of community in the classroom? Do you believe that your class has a strong sense of community, or not? What do you believe to be your role in helping your class to develop a strong sense of community? Please be as honest as possible and try to include specific examples or observations which support your thoughts.

Teacher's Response:

As a group, this class is kind and caring to each other. They are willing to help each other when asked by their teacher, or they volunteer. With a few exceptions, this class has the same goals: they are motivated to learn and behave versus misbehave and earn negative attention from their teacher. As a class, I constantly commend them on their behavior and efforts to try and do the "right thing" not for my approval but to be self-motivated to monitor their behavior. They have been receptive to this. As a community, they, as I said, are anxious to please. But, I feel they lack a bond which makes them a unit. I think some awareness in this area would be a positive enhancement to their 4th grade experience.

Appendix C

Final Teacher Evaluation of Read Aloud Discussions and Classroom Meeting Interventions

Please answer the following questions as fully and honestly as possible. Consider both the weekly read alouds (*Magical Hands, A Piece of Home, Louise's Gift,* and *Why Frog and Snake Never Play Together*) and discussions as well as the weekly classroom meetings. Please be as specific as possible and include examples wherever possible. Thanks!!!

For the first five questions, think about the above-mentioned stories which we read and the discussions which followed about friendship, recognizing differences in cultures and individuals, and people's special and unique gifts and talents.

1) Did you feel that the read alouds and the resulting discussions were helpful in making the students more comfortable about opening up and sharing personal experiences with their classmates? Why or why not?

Yes. While my class likes to share experiences, talking about "our" problems and concerns needs prodding. These books provided the incentive we needed.

2) Did you feel that the read alouds and resulting discussions were a useful tool in helping the students to learn to live together as a community? Why or why not?

Yes. We need to be conscious of the fact that we "live" together all year as a community of fellow peers and fellow learners. The read alouds made us aware of ourselves.

3) From your observations, what do you feel the students learned from listening to and discussing the read alouds?

They learned to think more about others than themselves.

4) Did the read alouds and resulting discussions help the students to recognize and appreciate their differences? If so, how? If not, why?

Yes, they were made aware of their own strengths and of those in their classmates. *Louise's Gift* made them understand that their special qualities were gifts to be used wisely and well. Also, they appreciated more the strengths of their classmates.

5) Do you feel that the read alouds and resulting discussions are something you will continue to use in your classroom? Why or why not?

The class meeting is a very valuable tool. It brings to light issues we deal with on a daily basis which could be resolved with an open discussion before things get out of control. It's a more personal effort on everyone's part to solve our problems productively and civilly.

For the next six questions, please think about the weekly class meetings based on agenda items requested by the students.

6) Did you find the classroom meetings useful in solving students' problems? Why or why not?

Yes. Once the students felt comfortable about putting suggestions in the envelope, we had open active discussions with helpful suggestions and productive results.

7) Do you think the classroom meetings helped each of the students to feel like an important part of their class? Why or why not?

Yes. These meetings changed some of my students for the better. Two of them with poor social skills were more open about discussing their problems and listening to peer

suggestions. The liked being the center of attention but secretly appreciated the care and thought that went into the discussions.

8) From your observations, did you notice any changes in the behavior of any of your students throughout the course of the interventions? What were the changes? Do you suppose the changes were in any way a result of the classroom meetings? Why or why not?

See #7

9) Do you believe that the classroom meetings helped the students to demonstrate or recognize their mutual concern for one another?

Yes. I have a class who on the whole are kind and sensitive to each other's needs. These meetings emphasized that quality and made them feel good about themselves.

10) Are classroom meetings something you will try to continue using in your classroom? Why or why not?

Yes. As I see issues arise, we will address them. I had planned to have meetings on Friday mornings to air any concerns or check on the status quo.

11) Overall, do you feel that there was any improvement in the sense of community within your classroom as a result of the read alouds, discussions, and class meetings? Please give specific reasons for your thoughts.

Yes. As I mentioned, two children changed for the better. Overall, everyone wanted to share support and concern. Those students who don't get along as well as they could with others (antagonistic behavior such as being critical, using put-downs, taking out frustrations on

others) have softened their remarks, or chosen to say nothing and try to get along and be a positive part of the group.

It (the meeting) was an excellent place to air problems in a comfortable, safe, trusting environment.

Appendix D

Student Debriefing Questions

1) What did you learn from the weekly read alouds, discussions, and challenges? Did you enjoy them?

2) Did you learn anything new about your classmates as a result of the weekly read alouds, discussions, and challenges?

3) Did you feel like your classmates were interested in what you had to say when you shared stories or ideas during the read alouds and discussions?

4) Do you feel that it is good or bad that you are different from your classmates? Why?

5) Did you think the weekly classroom meetings were useful? Why or why not?

6) Did you ever share a problem? Did the classroom meeting help to solve your problem? Why or why not?

7) If you did not share a problem, do you feel like you could share a problem with your classmates during the meetings and that they would be willing to help you solve it?

8) Did the classroom meetings help give you more control over what goes on in your classroom than you had when we started the read alouds and class meetings? Do you think you could change some of the things your teacher does if you brought them up at the class meetings?

9) Would you like to continue using the read alouds and class meetings? Why or why not?

10) Is your class a community? If so, do you feel like you are an important part of your classroom community? Why or why not?

Appendix E

Description of Book Themes, Discussions, and Challenges

Magical Hands:

It is important for everyone to feel like they have friends and that they are liked by others. Without friends, life would be very lonely. As a class, we need to make sure that everyone feels liked by their peers and that nobody feels like an outsider or like they are hated by their classmates. Challenge: Go out of your way to do or say something nice to somebody in the class who you are not really close friends with or someone with whom you do not usually associate. Let them know that you are interested in them and that you like them just the way they are.

Why Frog and Snake Never Play Together:

Even though people often seem to be very different, they usually have many things in common with each other. Friendship is important and, just because we are different, does not mean we cannot be friends with each other. It is acceptable for very different people to be very close friends. Challenge: Think about what it is that you admire about some of your classmates and let them know. Hearing is believing!

A Piece of Home

Moving to a new place is very hard and we need to do whatever we can to make new students feel welcome in our classroom. Also, there is a lot about people that you cannot know simply by looking at their external appearance and, oftentimes, we have a lot more in common

with people than we might think if we based our opinions on our first impressions. We need to give people a chance and get to know them before we prejudge them.

Louise's Gift:

We all have our own special gifts which make us unique and, just as we like to be appreciated by others, we need to remember to show an appreciation for others' special gifts and talents. Challenge: Sometime this week, tell at least one other person what you believe their special gift to be (what you admire most about them).

Appendix F

Sample Classroom Meeting Topics

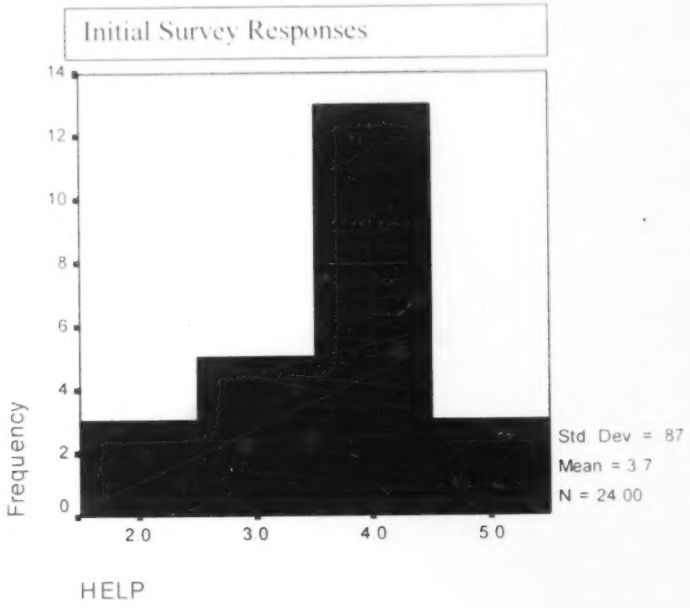
The following are sample classroom meeting topics which were addressed during the six week series of interventions:

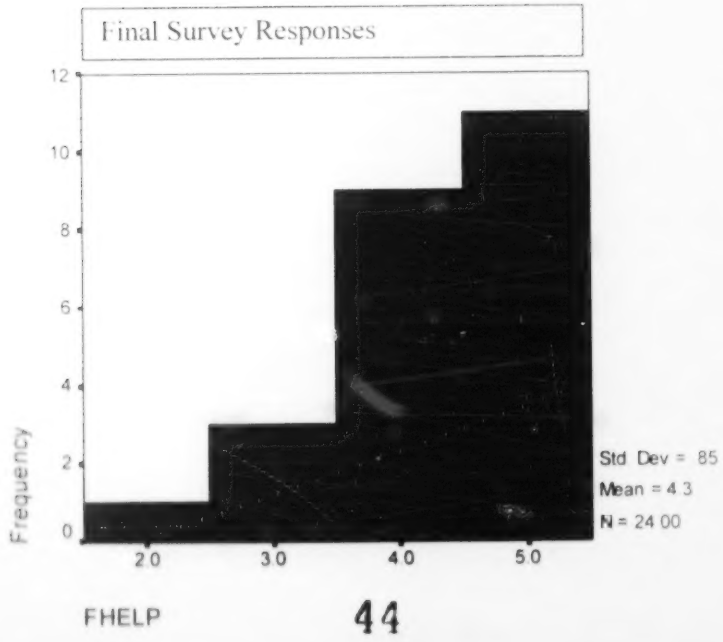
- What do you do when a student continually and consistently tries to annoy you? What do you say or do?
- What do you do when someone steals your coat hanger every morning just to be mean and they will not stop, even after you have asked them to?
- What do you do when someone hates you?
- What do you do when several boys always pull your hair and do not stop when asked to?
- What do you do when people sit at your desk to do their work, even though they have their own desk?
- What do you do when people say you're disgusting just because you blow your nose in the classroom?
- What do you do when someone picks a fight with you and persists, even when you try to walk away?
- What do you do when someone always picks on you and calls you mean names?

Appendix G

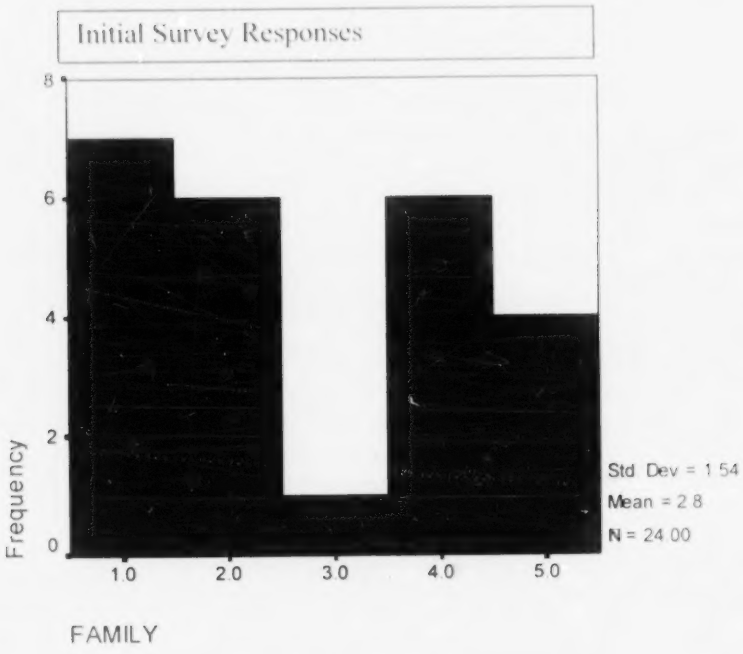
Graphs for Questions Which Improved Between the Initial and Final Surveys

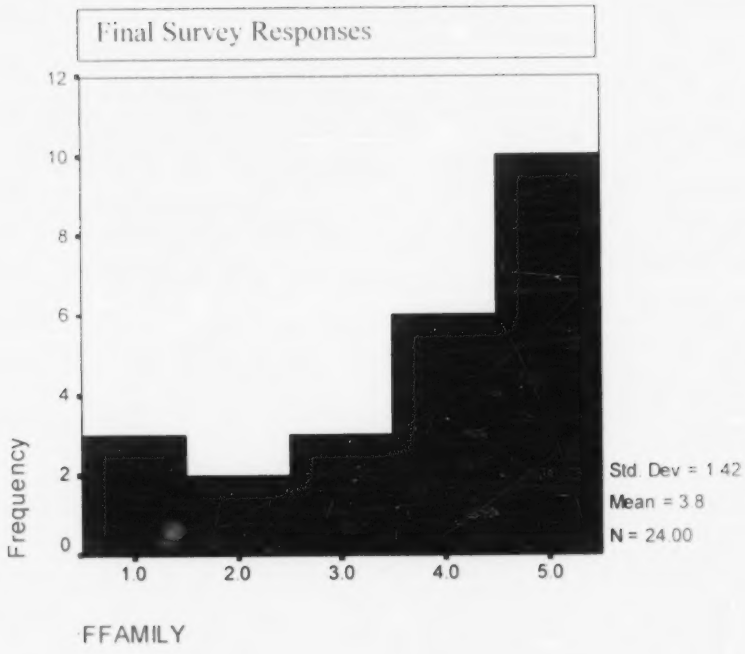
Question One: "Students in my class are willing to go out of their way to help someone."



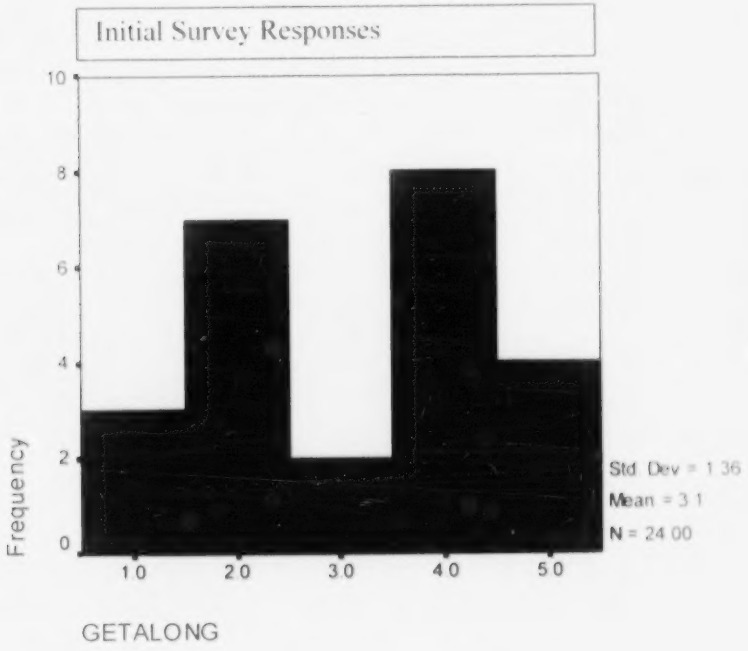


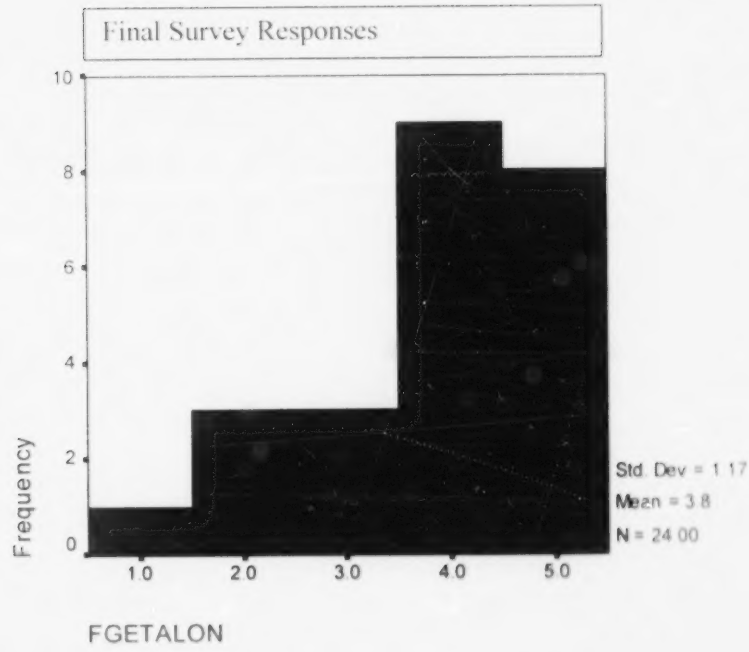
Question Three: "My class is like a family."



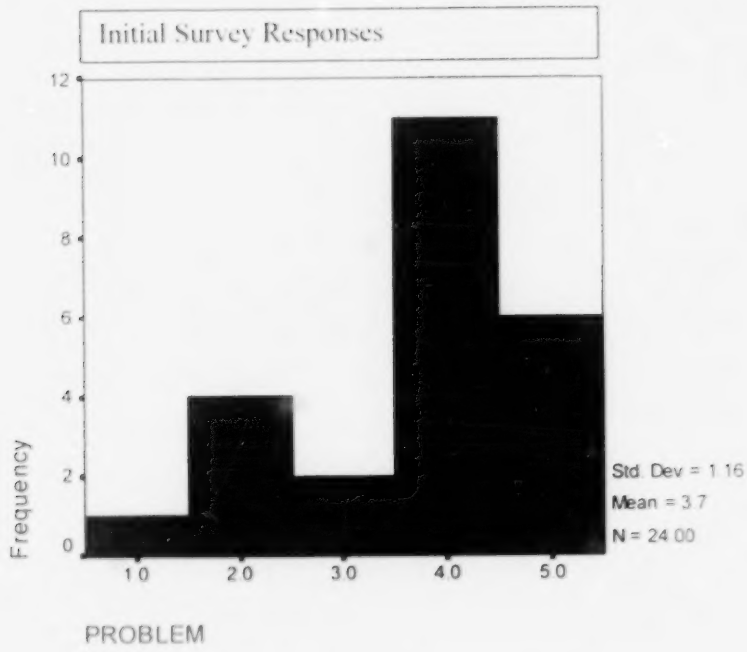


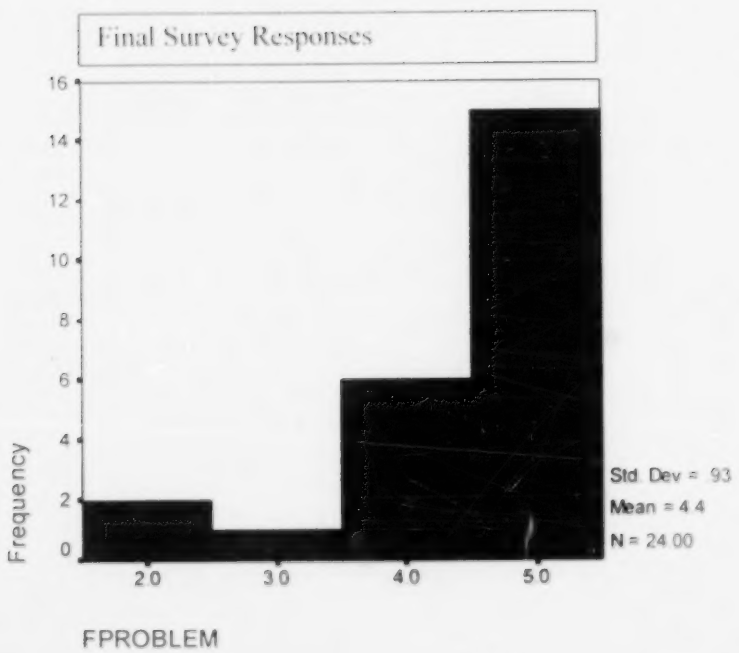
Question Eight: "Students in my class don't get along together very well." (Reverse-scored)





Question Thirteen: "Students in my class work together to solve problems."





Question Fourteen: "When someone in my class does well, everyone in the class feels good."